Queering The Norm in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

By definition, queer, is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, or the dominant (OED). According to Mary Klages, queer literary theory examines the nature of gender, sexuality, and identity within literature, but with particular attention to “normative and deviant categories” – with emphasis on the deviant (117). Gothic fiction is often the subject of queer theory because it frequently presents the dominant norm as destabilized and threatened by the deviant or marginalized other – the former often being dependent upon the latter. As William Hughes asserts, “to be queer is to be different” and “the Gothic, in a sense, has always been different” (3, 1). According to Mair Rigby, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a Gothic novel that is ideal for reading through the lens of queer literary theory in that it contains possibilities “that must be recognized [as] dangerous,” primarily because they render the supposedly normal open to question (51). Hughes further expands upon this position by stating, “if the queer state may persist successfully, even if only for a short disruptive period, then it retains the potential to construct itself as a viable alternative to all that is not-queer” (4). Examining Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* in the context of queer literary theory exposes a binary opposition of social bonds that disrupts the patriarchal structure of the objectification of women and presents a threat to the dominant social bond and the patriarchal power it supports.

However, before we begin an exploration of *Frankenstein* with this literary theory it is first necessary to understand the context in which it is used. According to Michel Foucault, the sexual categories we acknowledge today are historical constructs which began developing during the seventeenth century and which have become an integral part of the social code we know today (17-18). These constructs enable a massive body of work that connects *Frankenstein* with a queer reading that...
focuses on homosexuality. George Haggerty claims this is not unreasonable as intense male-male physical and psychological bonds are often the subject of the basic Gothic plot and this can often be read as the presence of a homosexual element (109). However, Hughes argues that “queerness . . . is more than a matter of encoding sexual preferences and identities “ and can often focus on the heterosexual as its subject (2). This usage of queer theory then opens up the possibility of a queer reading that has nothing to do with historical constructs of sexuality, but rather an unconventional reading of the text as it relates to heterosexuality. To further assist in this reading, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire – which describes a social bond between two people of the same sex – is placed at one end of a continuum of the male-male relationship with homosexual placed at the other (Between 2). By utilizing Sedgwick’s continuum it is then possible to think of men as possessing male-male desires while still possessing a sexuality identity that is heterosexual. When this alternate definition of queer is focused upon the social bonds and the heteronormative ideas of marriage presented within Shelley's novel, they reveal a binary opposition that Sedgwick's continuum allows us to explore further without involving issues of latent sexuality.

On the normative side of this binary opposition is a preferred homosocial bond with compulsory heterosexuality. According to Carolyn Oulton, this preferred norm was established within the upper-class tradition that required young boys to leave home for their education and enter an all-male environment where they were encouraged to develop close life-time bonds with other males (33). The fact that a male-male homosocial bond is the preferred bond within Shelley's novel is best illustrated by the words of Robert Walton:

But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy; and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil . . . I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes could reply to mine . . . I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. (Shelley 31)
It is ironic that Walton's letter is written on board a ship full of men, but this is indicative of Shelley's understanding that elite men gravitate towards finding their equal in a relationship with other elite men. This is further illustrated by the fact that Victor already possesses this important social bond with Henry Clerval. Clerval is the one who actively seeks Victor out, stands by him, and nurses Victor back to health after his collapse. Haggerty supports this conclusion when he argues that “throughout the novel Clerval functions as [Victor's] second self” and completes him as an “emotional counterpoint” to Victor's own intellectualism (56). In essence, it is the homosocial bond that permits the elite men of the nineteenth century to fulfill their emotional needs. Meanwhile, compulsory heterosexuality basically means obligatory sexual activity between members of opposite sex and it is able to meet the male need for social acceptance and reproduction. Adrienne Rich was the first to argue that patriarchy insisted upon compulsory heterosexuality as a social institution in order to perpetuate male social and economic privilege (18). While Rich specifically applies this term to heterosexuality and its repression of homosexuality, it can also be applied to a variety of social mechanisms and structures that repress the feminine\(^1\). Within the nineteenth century, the achievement of marriage was in fact a transfer of traditional patriarchal power that permitted men to control all aspects of a woman's life and signified the achievement of a socially enforced male maturity. To fail at achieving the norm of homosocial bonds with compulsory heterosexuality was to fail society's expectations of the masculine.

This concept of compulsory heterosexuality becomes evident within Shelley's novel when Victor's homosocial desires are compared with his lack of heterosexual desire for Elizabeth. When Victor speaks of his childhood relationship with Elizabeth he states, “harmony was the soul of our companionship” (Shelley 44). In contrast, Victor “united [himself] in the bonds of the closest friendship” with Clerval who is “a boy of singular talent” (Shelley 45). When Clerval arrives in Ingolstadt to visit, Victor enthusiastically reports that “nothing could equal my delight on seeing Clerval . . . I felt

\(^1\) See C.J. Pascoe's *Dude You're a Fag* for a more thorough discussion and application of this alternate perception of compulsory heterosexuality.
suddenly, and for the first time during many months, calm and serene joy” (Shelley 62). However, when Victor is reunited with Elizabeth after six years absence he dispassionately relays that “time had made great alterations in her form since I had last beheld her. . . . she [is now] a woman in stature and expression of countenance, which [is] uncommonly lovely” (Shelley 76, 78). Again, Elizabeth is the one whom Victor “fondly prized before every other gift of fortune” while Clerval is the “beloved friend, [whom] it delights [Victor] . . . . to dwell on the praise of which [he is] so eminently deserving” (88, 138). As for Clerval, he in turn declares that he “would rather be with [Victor] in [his] solitary rambles” and feels “at home” only when Victor is present (Shelley 142). As Haggerty summarizes: “men [within Shelley's novel] reserve their fullest expressions of love always for one another” (119). Jacqueline Labbe also supports this observation when she argues that Clerval is more the “ideal helpmate” than the “example of the perfect wife” that Elizabeth represents (356). In essence, it is within the relationship with Clerval that Victor finds the “restfulness and intellectual and bodily support” that — under the heterosexual norms of the twentieth century — would be expected to be found within a heterosexual partnership based on mutual desire (Labbe 357).

What is striking and ironic is that Shelley queers this norm with a deviancy of a preferred heterosocial bond with desiderate heterosexuality. Carole Beere describes a heterosocial bond as a social relationship between two people who prefer a friendship with those of the opposite gender (11). By extension desiderate heterosexuality is also characterized by an active longing for a heterosexual relationship with someone of the opposite gender that is usually based upon the heterosocial bond (OED). Basically, the words of Walton — as cited above — and his longing can be equally applied to both aspects of the deviant bond. Kate Ellis supports this conclusion when she argues that Shelley presents Walton on the periphery, looking in and longing for the attainment of the norm such as it exists between Clerval and Victor. At the same time Shelley places the monster in the same position, but his longing is for the “Paradise Lost” of the De Lacey family where “males and females learn together, role distinctions are minimal and domestic bliss is eventually recovered” (124-125). The deviance in this
binary opposite is to be found in the desire for a woman to participate in a male-female bond equal in value to the male-male homosocial bond. Of course according to twentieth century standards, the De Lacey family’s deviance would be the norm, but it must be remembered that this was not the case in the nineteenth century. Heterosexual relationships – especially among the elite – were driven by economic, social, and reproductive concerns rather than emotional connections. For example, Victor intends to marry Elizabeth not because of an emotional desire for her, but because it fulfills the dying wishes of his mother, consolidates an obvious asset into the familial unit, and fulfills society's expectations for reproduction and respectability. It is also important to the construction of the De Lacey as deviant that Shelley buries this idealized representation within a marginalized space away from the dominant norm with the monster as the sole witness. As the monster absorbs knowledge and formulates an identity within this seclusion, he also discovers the alternative social bond based on equality and which stands in sharp contrast to the representation of patriarchy that privileges the masculine and subordinates the feminine.

It is obvious that within Shelley's novel the bonds between men are the most important and these bonds not only exclude women, but successfully subordinate, marginalize, and objectify women. Claude Levi-Strauss supports this conclusion when he maintains that the “relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman . . . but between groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place (115). Gayle Rubin takes this idea further and delineates a “social reality” that contained “a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products” which are then eligible for exchange by men (158). In order to protest this objectification of women, Devon Hodges maintains that there has been a historic struggle in which women have desired to “speak within the language and codes of [their] society without being appropriated by them” and thus many women have sought to work from within the system and subtly open it up to what it is excluding (156). As Luce Irigaray summarizes, it a woman's
“responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it” and Shelley presents a novel that to all outward appearances conforms to the normative male voice and marginalized position of women (185). Yet a queer reading of the text reveals a deviant foreign voice that disrupts this initial impressions of the novel. To exemplify this, within Shelley's novel all of the primary female characters perfectly fulfill the model of the idealized nineteenth century woman – except one. Each of Shelley's female characters are placed in properly marginalized roles that are only important to the novel in the development of the masculine plot; yet each of these women perish, as Sedgwick phrases it, because of “the mutilating effects of [the] masculine civil war on women.” (Epistemology 182). Shelley also takes each of these ideal woman and presents them as acceptably objectified by the masculine. Caroline Frankenstein is “a fair exotic” and her husband goes to great lengths to insure that nothing disturbs her “soft and benevolent mind” (Shelley 42). Elizabeth Lavenza is the “pretty present” given to Victor by his mother and he perceives her as “mine – mine. . . all praises bestowed on her I [receive] as made to a possession of my own” (Shelley 44). Meanwhile Justine Moritz is “the most grateful little creature” (Shelley 67). However, the objectification of women is best illustrated when the monster threatens Victor with, “I shall be with you on your wedding-night” and Victor fails utterly to perceive the true nature of the threat as he concludes “in that hour I [shall die] (Shelley 146, 147). At first, it seems impossible that Victor could so misunderstand the monster's intent, but it is important to realize that Shelley is making a point about the role women played in the masculine life. Within Victor's worldview, Elizabeth as object has no part in the failed male relationship between himself and the monster, so of course she could never be a target for revenge. Bette London supports this position and argues that it is because Victor sees “man [as] single in his capacity for feeling and suffering” and that man “always occupies center stage” (263). However, it is the contrast in the male mindset possessed by the monster – and which is a product of his formation under the deviant norm – which allows him to see Elizabeth not as object, but as subject and thus a legitimate target.

Only one woman, Safie, does not fulfill the model, does not fall victim to Shelley's destruction,
and refuses to remain an object and thus embodies the message that Shelley is attempting to deliver with her queered text. When Safie asserts her independence and leaves the house of her father to conduct her own transaction of marriage she, as Kathleen Sheer summarizes it, gives “herself the authority to exist as subject” rather than as object. The De Lacey family, in turn, welcome her as a valid subject in what the monster calls "the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds" (Shelley 110). A direct comparison between the response of Victor in his reunion with Elizabeth – as cited above – and the response of Felix to being reunited with Safie can illustrate the difference between being object and being subject within a relationship. While Victor's reaction is formal and mild, “Felix seemed ravished with delight when he saw [Safie], every trait of sorrow vanished from his face, and it instantly expressed a degree of ecstatic joy, of which I could hardly have believed it capable; his eyes sparkled, as his cheek flushed with pleasure” (Shelley 106). Furthermore, equal attention needs to paid to the the words Shelley uses to express Safie's motivation for taking agency and becoming subject. When Safie speaks of her early education she recalls that “her mother, born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was so reduced [and] instructed her daughter . . . to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit” (Shelley 112). Furthermore, Safie “sickened at the prospect of again returning . . . and being immured within the wall of a haram [sic], allowed only to occupy herself with infantile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul” (Shelley 112). Again a queer reading of these words, appropriated by the feminine, can read as that foreign voice that disrupts the patriarchal narrative – which condones the objectification of women – and demands that women instead be made subject within heterosocial and heterosexual relationships.

It is not accidental that Shelley first engages the reader in the norms of her society and then subtly introduces a radical deviancy that disrupts and thus threatens the ideology of the norm. By creating the queerness of the perfect heterosexual bond in her novel, Shelley exposes the emptiness of the compulsory heterosexual bond. In addition, permitting the prospect of an alternate to exist, produces a deviant reality that is not only highly dangerous to the dominant norm and the patriarchal
power it supports, but according to Labbe, also threatens to expose that norm as an unattainable myth that not only limits a woman, but erases “the woman herself” (345). Hodges supports this position when she states that “what is repressed by society cannot be included on any terms” for fear of “causing its maddening dislocation . . . or causing its transformation” (161). This suggests that the dominant norm is under attack in Shelley's novel and threatens loss of control over the domestic sphere. This potential threat is best illustrated by the circumstances that surround the destruction of the female monster. With the De Lacey’s setting the example of the ideal social unit for the monster to emulate, he demands Victor create a female companion "with whom [he] can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being" (Shelley 128). As Eric Daffron points out, the monster “imagines social and sexual relations as an intercourse based on equality and sympathy”(427). Labbe supports this viewpoint when she highlights that within the monster's request for a female he repeatedly emphasizes that the female monster is to be the same creature he is himself. She is to be “as deformed and as horrible . . . as hideous . . . with the same defects” and most importantly “of the same nature as myself” (Shelley 128, 129 emphasis mine). The monster asks for only one difference and that is for “a creature of another sex” and Labbe argues that according to societal expectations of the time “different sexes . . . would not be of the same nature [and] given the social and legal status of women and wives . . . they would certainly not be equal” (Shelley 129; Labbe 355 emphasis mine). In essence, the female creature is to have the same in every way as the monster even though there is a difference in the biological sex of the two. This goes directly counter to the very basics of the ideology that supports patriarchy, because women are believed to have an entirely different, and weaker, nature from men and this justifies the imposition of patriarchy.

However innocent the monster's request for a companion might seem, it is obvious that Victor interprets the request quite differently and sees only a threat “whose joint wickedness might desolate the world” (Shelley 128). When the female monster is read as a metaphor of the deviant desires then of course she cannot be allowed to exist – even for a short while – for she might provide a viable
alternative to the concepts of the cultural order upon which the power of patriarchy is based. As Judith Wilt summarizes it: “Frankenstein looks at his daughter/creature lying unanimated on the table [and] recognizes that she, unpredictable and uncontrollable, will take both the son/creature and the new race out of his power” (37). Consequently, when “the wickedness of [his own] promise bursts upon [him]” Victor “trembling with passion” tears the female apart before the horrified eyes of the male monster (Shelley 144, 145). Just as the monster’s hope of a heterosexual bond with desiderate heterosexuality is destroyed, the monster then retaliates by destroying the male homosocial bond and the compulsory heterosexual bond by murdering both Clerval and Elizabeth. This then binds the monster and Victor into a corrupted homosocial bond based on hatred and revenge with no possibility of either a compulsory or desiderate heterosexuality. In this queering of the norm, it is then revealed that using women as mere objects which mediate the relationships between men leads to the destruction of the feminine and thus the very desire to preserve the norm, according to London, actually “destabilizes their relationship [for] once no women remain, the novel becomes a claustrophobic, homophobic space of only men”(426). Ironically, it is the concept of the male homosocial bond – which is supposed to provide an avenue of cultural survival for patriarchy – which Shelley uses as an avenue of cultural destruction for the whole of society.

Within Shelley’s Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, an application of queer literary theory reveals a binary opposition that includes both a norm and a deviant. This queer reading avoids involving latent sexuality issues and instead focuses on a heterosexual narrative that examines a heterosexual deviance from a heterosexual norm. Thus the dominant norm of a homosocial bond – which fulfills the emotional needs of men – with compulsory heterosexuality – which fulfills the social and reproductive needs of men – is able to be challenged by a deviant preference for a heterosocial bond with desiderate heterosexuality – which is able to fulfill both needs of both partners simultaneously. In addition to revealing this binary opposition to destabilize the norm, Shelley’s work is also able to introduce a foreign voice within the normal male narrative that disrupts the objectification of women by the
patriarchal structure and demands that they be made subject and an equal part of both the heterosocial and heterosexual relationship. Of course, any threat to change the status of women from object to subject is a danger to the existing hegemony and within the novel this threat is apparently countered by the destruction of the deviant. However, Shelley then illustrates that what is meant to protect patriarchy not only has the potential to destroy it, but also to instigate the collapse of humanity by creating a space in which only men survive in an unmediated homophobic relationship with other men.
Works Cited


